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Traditionally, the early iconographic image of the Virgin Mary displays "crosses" or "stars" on the *maphorion*—the Virgin's "robe," "veil," or "mantle" as it is often called. The *maphorion* is "a large shawl covering the head and shoulders. Originally, [it was] the costume of Palestinian and Syrian women, [and] was then worn by the early Christian deaconesses. Decorated with the Virgin's star, it forms an essential part of the Virgin's garment in icon painting."[1] The cross or star image is usually found on the Virgin's veil on her head, or there are three crosses or stars on the head and on the left and right shoulders. These are commonly known to represent Mary's virginity: before birth, during birth and after birth. Exploring this symbolism more carefully, deep and mystical meaning can be found that begins to illuminate this aspect of "ever-virginity," suggesting also more than mere physical virginity for the woman who bore Christ. [See Figure 1]

A. The Iconographic Language of Mary's Virginity

According to Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, "This symbol of perpetual virginity (αιεπαρθενεία)—before, during and after confinement—should figure on all icons of the mother

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[1] Konrad Onasch, *Icons* (Cranbury, NJ: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1969), 421.

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of God," in the Byzantine era.[2] "It is a decorative development of the three crosses which habitually decorated the *maphorion* of the Virgin on more ancient icons."[3] This iconographic symbol displaying Virgin Mary's perpetual virginity is a thematic that continues on into European medieval art, the Renaissance, the Baroque era, the neo-classical period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even to the folk art of contemporary time. Importantly, however, the symbolic tradition begins fundamentally with the sign of the cross.

An important question arises from this long-standing tradition. What do the one or three crosses (or stars) as they were consistently depicted on the Virgin's *maphorion* really mean? How do they describe "virginity"? And how do they lead us to a sense of her "ever-virginity" (αιεπαρθενεία)? Mary was a virgin when she conceived a son; she gave birth as a virgin; and she lived the rest of her life as a virgin. Theologically, what did this term "virgin" mean in the patristic sense and in reference to the symbol used in ancient iconography?

1. "Ekphrasis"

Commentary on the use of "crosses" or "stars" on the *maphorion* of the Virgin, symbolizing "virginity," abounds in the iconography of the Theotokos and technically is described in the category of *ekphrasis*, or explanation of how symbols represent deep and abiding mystery, which is a term built on the verb *ekphrazo*, (εκφράζω, "to tell in full"),[4] to tell of the depth and fullness of something. According to George Galavaris, in a brief paper on the "Stars of the Virgin": ". . . the three stars which often adorn the *maforion* of the Virgin . . . serve[s] as an illustration of the unexplored wealth of *ekphrasis*."[5] Ouspensky

[2] The Byzantine Empire refers to the medieval state that existed for more than a thousand years, generally understood to have begun in 324 when Constantinople was founded by Emperor Constantine the Great. The empire at its height encircled the Mediterranean Sea but remained in flux as various areas were conquered and lost.

[3] Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 81,84.

[4] *The Classic Greek Dictionary* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Co., 1943), 212.

[5] George Galavaris, "The Stars of the Virgin, an *ekphrasis* of an *ikon* of the Mother of God," *Eastern Churches Review* 1 (1966-68): 364.

explains that the Marian cult of the fifth century produced many icons of the Virgin, beginning with the depiction of a single cross on the forehead of Mary which actually calls for an examination of the symbols as they were implemented in early Christianity and continue through the ages. The study, therefore, of this particular *ekphrasis* of the cross and star on the Virgin's veil presents an illuminative opportunity to explore the meaning of Mary's ever-virginity.

Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) "often called the Great church, was built and decorated from A.D. 532 to 537, during the reign of emperor Justinian. Over the years, figural mosaics were added to the original non-figural mosaic program, reflecting the ongoing political, religious, and ceremonial needs of the cathedral's patrons and of the building itself."[6] The use of the cross on the *maphorion* is described in Natalia Teteriatnikov's article on the Fossati and Byzantine Institute restoration of mosaics of Hagia Sophia in the nineteenth century and twentieth century respectively. *The Virgin Enthroned with Christ Child* can be seen in this report.[7] In this great large mosaic, Virgin Mary sits on a throne and the Christ child on her lap. Three crosses are seen on her *maphorion*. Yet another example is found in a smaller mosaic in the South Gallery of Hagia Sophia dating to about 1118.[8] Part of the restoration process included the finding of linen papers with the designs traced out. On one of these papers one can see a close-up of the virgin's head and the form of the cross which shows a simple cross made of four small disconnected blocks,[9] very different from the Latin cross in a mosaic in the inner narthex bay and similar cross mosaics throughout the narthex.[10] This would imply that the tradition

[6] Natalia B. Teteriatnikov, "Mosaics of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul: The Fossati Restoration and the Work of the Byzantine Institute" (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1988). Available online at http://www.doaks.org/publications/doaks_online_publications/TEMHP.html (accessed June 1, 2009).

[7] Teteriatnikov, "Mosaics," 47. See Fig. 49: The installation of this mosaic took place after the end of iconoclasm in 843 and is associated with the homily of St. Photius, patriarch of Constantinople, given on Holy Saturday in March 867.

[8] Teteriatnikov, "Mosaics," 50, Fig. 52.

[9] Teteriatnikov, "Mosaics," 70. See the description for Plate 1 on p. 69.

[10] Teteriatnikov, "Mosaics," 57. See Fig. 62.

of the simple cross on the head of the Virgin is distinct from the tradition of the Latin cross, perhaps indicating an older origin for the cross on the *maphorion*.

In other iconographic representations, there are three crosses on the *maphorion*, one on each shoulder. By the middle of the Byzantine period, these appeared consistently. The image of the Virgin Mary appeared not only iconographically in churches and shrines as painted panels, but also in stone bas relief and on coins, medals, communion plates, vestments, and other liturgical vessels. "The cross is formed either of straight lines, or of four dots, or of four lozenges. At times it appears as a glorified, luminous cross, when rays are added."[11] These crosses did not always appear on the *maphorion* but on other parts of her clothing. Some scholars think that crosses on Virgin Mary's shoulders resembled the *omophorion* of a bishop and the collection of crosses suggested the *polystavrion*.[12] This direct reference to the priestly vestments of early- and mid-Byzantium represents not so much the Virgin as priest but her priestly act of bringing God incarnate into the world. Fundamentally, the Virgin's work of motherhood brought God the Life-giver into the human realm and it is her motherhood that is celebrated. The cross, therefore, represented Christ's gift of eternal life, life unending, the kingdom breaking into created reality, a demonstration of the fruits of the tree of life because God himself hung upon it; and for this reason the Virgin is thereby marked with the cross.

2. The Meaning of the Cross on the "Maphorion"

Early Christians would mark themselves in the faith by making a cross on their forehead, stating belief in the life-giving sacrifice of God's Son. Gradually, perhaps in reaction to the rise of monophysitism, the gesture moved to a broader signing on the head and each shoulder. Andreas Andreopoulos in his recent study on the *Sign of the Cross* summarizes the development in the early centuries of Christianity as a movement from marking

[11] Galavaris, "The Stars of the Virgin," 364.

[12] Galavaris, "The Stars of the Virgin," 365.

oneself in the faith of Christ to a signing that in its action takes the faithful person into the mystery of Christ:

> ...the sign of the cross starts from the self, but it describes an inward journey that is shared by the entire church and leads back to the church. The way of the cross is not a pursuit for a personal, individual spiritual merit, but an offering of the self to God. The deeper the journey into the self, the more complete is the offering of the self to God.
>
> This spiritual analytical journey into the self is practiced to varying degrees by all Christians, though the monks of the desert have lived in the practice of this journey. It is no surprise then, that monasticism is often thought of as the way of the cross.[13]

Mary's fiat, her acceptance of God's plan which is her total resignation of self to the work of God, can then be recognized when her image is signed with the cross. This provides us with yet another insight into the symbol of the cross on the *maphorion.* The cross appears iconographically on the forehead of many saints.

> Whereas the one cross would be a Christian testimony, a source of Christ's light and a talisman, the three crosses would allude to the Trinity. Their persistent appearance on the forehead and the shoulders may have something to do with the practice of crossing oneself whereby Christians touch the three crosses with their fingers, thus declaring their faith in the Trinity and drawing strength from the cross.[14]

Tertullian, who lived in the second to the third century, speaks of the gesture of the cross being used in private prayer: "Before beginning any action, when we enter the house or leave it, when we put on our clothes or our shoes, when we seat ourselves at table, at lamp-lighting, or on going to bed, we trace on our foreheads the sign of the cross."[15] A common understanding of the cross in the earliest centuries was its meaning as the

[13] Andreas Andreopoulos, *The Sign of the Cross: The Gesture, the Mystery, the History* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 75.

[14] Galavaris, "The Stars of the Virgin," 365.

[15] Tertullian quoted by Walter Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1947), 128.

source of life, being the tree of life. "The triumphal cross as it was depicted in the basilicas was not only studded with jewels but burgeoning with flowers."[16] Often, to differentiate from a cross used before Christian times to represent the sun-god, early use formed the cross in the form of an "X," to represent the first Greek letter in Christ's name.[17]

Robin Margaret Jensen tells us more about the early cross symbol when it appeared to be the Hebrew letter *tau,* which was traced on the forehead of a faithful Christian. Explaining cross-markings found among pre-Constantinian graffiti at the Vatican or on more formal Christian epitaphs in Rome and in other areas of the Roman Empire, dated to the third century, she notes the following:

> Not all these marks were direct references to the cross of crucifixion, however. Rather, the Hebrew letter *taw*, the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet, made as a simple cross, or "x" figure, may be the source of many of the Christian markings, and originally served as a mark that identified the righteous. In Ezekiel 9:4-6, God commands that the foreheads of the repentant be marked with a special sign that will protect them from the coming slaughter of the guilty. The Hebrew *taw* is equivalent to the Greek *tau*, a simple cross or "T"-shaped sign, used when marking a cross made as a blessing or protection. In time, this sign came to be identified with the cross of crucifixion, but the relationship is complex and only established in degrees and in distinct contexts.[18]

Can we see that later "contexts" might include the use of the cross on the saints and particularly on the Virgin mother to mark and remember her great holiness and relationship to the Trinity?

Jensen also explains that *tau*-crosses and other "ambiguous or hidden cross figures [are] found in epigraphic representations of anchors, axes, masons' tools, and ships' masts."[19] In a time of persecution, these ambiguous signs were necessary.

[16] Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, 128.

[17] Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, 129.

[18] Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 137.

[19] Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 138.

Overall, Jensen concludes: "Thus the cross as symbol was clearly present in the visual imagination of early Christian writers, who saw it not only as an apotropaic [safeguarding against evil] sign, but also as a sign of Christ's victory over sin and death."[20]

3. Three Stars

During the mid-Byzantine period, the three crosses were usually replaced by three stars and this motif of three stars on the Virgin's *maphorion* continued into late- and post-Byzantine periods of religious art. According to Galavaris, it can be demonstrated that the stars were a stylized rendering of the crosses, originating in a cross indicated by radiating arms around a center hole. [See Figure 2.] The stars continued to carry a deep mystical meaning of Trinitarian faith as well. According to Galavaris, probing the mystical implications of early Byzantine symbolism, in particular to an *ekphrasis* concerning the icon of the Theotokos, is a matter that has not received much attention. At some point, perhaps connected to the liturgical references of Mary as a "star that heralds the sun," the crosses changed to stars. Also, according to Galavaris, the star motif should neither be symbolically related to the star that hovered over the cave of the Messiah's birth nor to the stars adorning the woman of Revelation 12.[21] In his opinion, *ekphrasis* of the three stars on the *maphorion* points directly to Mary's holiness and her abiding connection to the Trinity.

It should be noted that some Christians reflect on Byzantine icons and guess at the meanings of symbols they see. When a scholar of Byzantine iconography establishes the meaning of a certain symbol, it is corroborated in multiple contemporary pieces and usually in reference to liturgical texts and patristic writings of the same period. In this way, *ekphrasis* must proceed carefully in the exploration of the mystical symbolism of iconography, a practice that was begun in the fourth century and lives on to the present day. One example is an *ekphrasis* offered by John Eugenikos (15th C.) published in

[20] Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 141.

[21] Galavaris, "The Stars of the Virgin," 366.

the mid-eighteenth century by E. Boissonade, as mentioned by Galavaris. Eugenikos explores the mystery of an icon of the Virgin and Child by Philostratus. His commentary tells us that the *maphorion*, looking like a *chiton* worn by Syrian women in the context of the iconographer, is decorated with three stars:

> Nevertheless the three shining stars appearing on the forehead and the shoulders should not be considered as having a secondary significance. They are symbols of the Grace of the luminous Trinity which as soon as it dwelt in her caused the One to be revealed from her.[22]

Galavaris cautions that in this study of *ekphrasis*, we perhaps should not take this commentary necessarily as a commonly accepted interpretation at the time of the writing of the icon or even representing the tradition of earlier times. Also, Galavaris attests to a plausible possibility that Theotokos needed to be identified in a special way, apart from saints painted with a cross on their forehead. "The need, therefore, arose for a symbol which would clarify the special position of Mary in relation to the Trinity and would include the concept of light and the luminous. The star, being the symbol of the Trinity since early Christian times, was the obvious choice."[23] [Again, see Figure 2 for the development of the star from the cross, according to Galavaris.]

In summarizing the interpretation arrived upon by Galavaris, Svetlana Rakić notes, in particular, the use of three stars derived from crosses that appear on the *maphorion* of the Virgin in icons found in Serbian churches in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which demonstrate the iconography of Crete, dating from the fifteenth century after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. These icons of Tuzla and Sarajevo are "decorated with golden tassels on her sleeve and three stars on her forehead and shoulders."[24]

[22] Galavaris, "The Stars of the Virgin," 367, quoting E. Boissonade, ed. *Anectdota Nova* (Paris, 1844), 338-339.

[23] Galavaris, "The Stars of the Virgin," 368.

[24] Svetlana Rakić, "The Representations of the Virgin on Cretan Icons in Serbian Churches in Bosnia-Herzegovina," Project Muse, from *Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies* 20/1 (2006): 64. Accessed at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/serbian_studies/v001/1.1.rakic.pdf.

> As early as the 5th century there appears a cross on the part that falls over her forehead and later, but still within the early Christian period, two more crosses were added on her shoulders. By the middle of the Byzantine period, the three crosses on the *maphorion* have become a common element in the representations of the Virgin in various compositions and media, including coins and seals, and continued to appear throughout Byzantine art. The cross was formed either of straight lines, or of four dots, or of four lozenges. At times, it appears as a glorified, luminous cross, when ornamented rays are added. The cross on the forehead is associated with the custom that the early Christians had of displaying this symbol on their forehead (as a Christian testimony, a source of Christ's light and a talisman), and the three crosses would allude to the Trinity.[25]

Rakić adds:

> During the middle Byzantine period there appear examples with the three stars in place of the crosses. These stars are not variations of the crosses, as proved by the existence of the examples which combine the cross and the star, as seen on the Tuzla icon. It has been assumed that these three stars, which were more popular in the late and Post-Byzantine periods and which present numerous variations, continue to carry the Trinitarian symbolism and that in fact they can be explained as a decorative development of the cross.[26]

Rakić, then, agrees with the analysis that the three stars, deriving from the cross symbol, direct the mystical meaning to the Trinity. This would mean that the "ever-virginity" of Mary is found in her ever-relationship to the Trinity.

Another possibility exists that may explain the use of stars on the Virgin's *maphorion*. Origen, one of the early Church Fathers, who lived 185 to 254, was known for his intense interest in cosmology and, in particular, to the stars. Origen's ideas were highly influenced by Platonic philosophical thought. However, he did not truly consider himself as a Platonist philosopher but primarily an interpreter of Scripture.[27] According to Alan Scott's

[25] Rakić, "The Representations of the Virgin on Cretan Icons," 64.

[26] Rakić, "The Representations of the Virgin on Cretan Icons," 65.

[27] Alan Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), xiii.

study of Origen's cosmology, it is fascinating to note that Origen had "extensive contact with Jewish apocalyptic literature and Gnostic Christianity."[28] Scott explains that:

> Though questions about the souls of stars now look quite whimsical, they were once seriously debated by philosophers. In fact, discussions of the life of the stars were common in Hellenistic schoolrooms. Origen's ideas on the stars and their life is part of a much broader philosophical tradition which is only rarely mentioned in treatments of Greek philosophy.[29]

Although this topic is far too complex to fully analyze here, it is interesting to note the possibility that the connection of a soul which has ascended to Heaven, or has become one of great holiness such as the Virgin Mary's, can be represented by stars. Scott demonstrates how both Origen and Irenaeus may have contemplated these connections:

> Origen (like Irenaeus) felt that many questions could only be decisively answered in the next life, believing that, since the visible world was only an image of an intelligible and invisible one, many problems could be better understood when we were in the kingdom of the heavens. [Origen wrote . . .] "When . . . the saints have reached the heavenly places, then they will clearly see the nature of the stars one by one, and will understand whether they are living beings or whatever else may be the case."[30]

It is not completely obvious how Origen applied the possibility that stars are living souls. According to Scott, he remained open on the issue, one which was popular in the Middle-Platonic age. However, there is a clear connection for Origen that the resurrected body rises in glory and ascends through the heavens, becoming ethereal and luminous. Scott describes this possibility as Origen thought about it:

> When human beings rise from the dead, they ascend through the heavens. The resurrection body is ethereal and luminous, like the bodies of

[28] Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, xiv.
[29] Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, xv.
[30] Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 122-123.

> stars, and resurrected humanity visits heavenly bodies, to which they (it would seem) have a physical kinship. . . . Resurrected souls, however, have a higher destiny, and eventually go beyond the fixed sphere ("the firmament") and ascend to a higher earth, the "earth of heaven," or even above that to the true heaven. Since stars only measure out the seasons until the Last Day, and since they too are included in the Redemption of Christ, their destiny is probably thought of in the same way, though Origen does not address this point.[31]

It is important to say here that Christians were diametrically opposed to pagan worship of celestial elements, including the stars, as was pagan practice at the time, not only in Origen's time but also continuing into later centuries.[32] However, symbols can be assimilated into Christianity with new meaning, such as the mid-third-century *Christus Sol* mosaic found on a vault in the necropolis under St. Peter's Basilica in the *Grotte Vaticane* in Rome.[33] In this depiction of Christ, he is seen as Apollo traversing the heavens in a horse-drawn chariot. From a cultural point of view, the prevalent association of holiness with the heavens and the stars presents a possible explanation of the three stars on the *maphorion*. The discussion here, then, is only to suggest that in the second to the third century there was a philosophical culture that would have implied the presence of stars as meaning that the Virgin's soul was luminous as it ascended into the heavens on its way to God.

[31] Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 164.

[32] E.g., Cyril of Alexandria, of the early 5th century, expressed this concern, as we see in a recent translation of his festal letters. See Philip R. Amidon, S.J. [Translator] and John J. O'Keefe [Introduction and Notes], in *St. Cyril of Alexandria, Festal Letters 1-12* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 106. Cyril wrote about the pagans: "And raising their brows to their temples, expectorating widely and generously, and combing their long beards with their hands, they stare in wonder at the sky, speaking of how it encircles all of the earth under the sun, and how it holds everything as though in its bosom, enveloping what is inside like a tent. Then they busy themselves with the positions of the stars in it, and are astonished at the courses of the sun and moon. Footnote 22 then tells us "Critiquing astrological practices was a common trope in ancient Christian literature."

[33] John Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, Inc., 1970), Fig. 1.

Yet another possibility that comes from the culture of the early centuries, based in its consideration of stars as images of Heaven, includes a connection to the image of a "Virgin" in Virgo, the only constellation in the Zodiac that is represented by a woman.

> There was little agreement among Classical writers as to who this virgin might have been. Ancient suggestions include Dike (Justice); Tyche (Fortune); Erigone, the daughter of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra; and Parthenos, a baby daughter of Apollo by Chrysothemis. Inexplicably, she has also been called Demeter, in spite of the well-known fact that the goddess bore Persephone, Plutos, Philomelus, and the house of Arion.[34]

Renowned Byzantine scholar Konrad Onasch points to this possible explanation of the stars representing "virginity" appearing on the *maphorion*.

> Virgin's Star (Latin: *spica*): in the Orient of antiquity this was the star of Venus, frequently represented as a virgin holding a child or a spike of corn; in icon painting it is used as a decoration of the *maphorion* of the Virgin.[35]

Onasch describes Our Lady of Vladimir (*Bogomater Vladimirskaja*):

> The icon of "Our Lady of Vladimir" was originally intended to be carried in processions; the slit for the staff can still be seen in its lower border. The Virgin's dark cherry-red *maphorion* with a broad and precious edging is embroidered with a star where it rests on her forehead and shoulders. This is an emblem which can be traced back to the *spica*, the old oriental Virgin's star.[36]

[34] Edward Tripp, *The Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology* (New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1974), 597-598.

[35] Onasch, *Icons*, 424.

[36] Onasch, *Icons*, 341. The particular icon that he describes is a 12th- or 13th-century Russian copy from the Tret'jakov State Gallery in Moscow. It may be seen in Plates 1 and 2. In this particular icon, it is plain to see that the stars could be elaborated crosses as Galavaris suggested.

Onasch subtly suggests that the "Virgin's star" which was "of the Orient" may have had its origin in the early Christianity of Syria—a land that was characterized by its cultural interest in the stars. In a compact guide to iconography produced by the J. Paul Getty Museum in California, Alfredo Tradigo points to the stars on the *maphorion* of "The Virgin Hodegetria" [Virgin showing the way to Christ] with the brief information that "On her shoulders and head, Mary wears the triple, star-shaped cross, an ancient Syrian symbol of virginity (before, during, and after delivery.)"[37]

Lastly, although Galavaris discounts the possible connection of the use of the star to the star of Bethlehem, there remains one other connection postulated by some, to recall the star found in the earliest known image of the Virgin mother in the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome.[38] A mid-second century fresco of the Virgin mother and her child shows a figure pointing upward.[39] Most scholars interpret this to be Balaam pointing to a star, a popular image in early Christianity representing the prophecy of Balaam. "The oldest and most significant picture [of Mother and Child] represents Balaam pointing to a star above the head of the Infant, an allusion to his prophecy (Num. 24:17): 'I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not nigh: there shall come forth a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.'"[40] This possible concept for the use of the star raises yet another idea in a tapestry of meaning. The star could represent the Child as the prophesied messiah. The iconographic virgin holds this messiah within her womb

[37] Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church,* trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004), 170. Here, the specific icon described is *The Virgin of Kazan*, 1649, by iconographer Timofei Rostovets, in the Rostove Museum of Russia.

[38] There is an earlier possible depiction of the Virgin mother in a wall painting in the Catacomb of Priscilla dating to the late second or early third century that appears to be a woman in Roman dress holding an infant. There are no crosses or stars on this image. See Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, Plate 5.

[39] Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, Plate 18, c.

[40] Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, 80.

before the Nativity and constantly in her arms in the Byzantine iconographic types that come later. In these types, she points the way to her son as the Christ (*Hodegetria*) [possibly a parallel to Balaam pointing to the star] and also embraces a loving, human tender relationship with Christ as her human child (*Eleousa*).

4. Fountain of Life

When we begin to reflect on the mystical meaning of three stars to represent Mary's bearing of God into the world as life-giver, along with her special relationship to the Trinity, it may be legitimate to explore clothing of Mary (on the *maphorion*, cuffs, hems, and neckline), which were used after the occurrence of a spiritual event in the fifth century at *Pigi* (a place just outside ancient Constantinople). In this account, the Theotokos brought healing from her Son to a dying man at a pool of water. Eventually, the site became a shrine that still exists today with access to a pool of healing water. Despite many attacks and ruination of the site at various periods over the centuries, even today it is known as a highly spiritual place. At this shrine, all the patriarchs of the Eastern Orthodox Church are buried. Over 1,500 years, the shrine at Pigi has been a miraculous location, watched over by the Virgin, with its pool representing a "source" of life-giving water. It is impossible to define exactly the mystery of the tradition of Virgin Mary at *Pigi* and the many shrines[41] under her protection that have had pools or are associated with streams of water. Yet another seventh- to tenth-century tradition of the Theotokos of Blachernae (also just outside ancient Constantinople), the "Virgin of Protection," gives us further testimony of Mary's relationship to a life-giving flowing through her from her Son the Life-giver, that is connected to her virginity of holiness.[42] According to

[41] E.g., the Hodegon Monastery and shrine of Blachernitissa.

[42] A phrase developed by the author to express that Mary's virginity was not a physical virginity alone, but a complete filling of her person with the presence of God, making her a "holy place" as seen in the icons that portray her as the Burning Bush or the Holy Temple itself (symbolized by a draped cloth inside a building). This concept is found in many Marian hymns of the ancient liturgies related to the "life-giving" shrines described, where the life-giving gifts from God flow through her.

the vision of Andrew the Fool and his student Epiphanios, along with a few other faithful at prayer in the chapel nearby, the Virgin appeared to float above the sanctuary and was seen in a flash of light along with a peal of thunder from the altar. This occurred in a shrine housing the holy relics of Mary—possibly her robe, her veil or her belt, or all three. This tradition of the Theotokos of Protection, occurring sometime between the seventh and tenth century in Blachernae outside Constantinople, traveled to the Slavic countries and became the important Feast of Pokrov. In the fifteenth-century tradition of Russian iconography in Pokrov, the icon of the "Protection of the Holy Virgin" portrays the Virgin floating beneath the ceiling of the church's apse with two angels holding a veil above her head, suggesting her *maphorion* as the *aier* of the temple. Always, we see the continuing faith of Christians experiencing the Theotokos, Mary the mother of Christ, as a special woman who continues to be the mother of her Son's faithful in the world.

These ancient devotional traditions and holy sites of the Theotokos and her life-giving role are all characterized by having *hagiasma*, holy water flowing from a stream, in a pool, or from an image of the Virgin Mary. In icons of the Virgin there were portals that provided a flow of the *hagiasma* water, not only on her head and shoulders, but also on her wristbands, the hem of her garment, and often in numerous other locations on her clothing. An example is a marble relief from Constantinople which shows holes that scholars believe may have even been constructed to allow water to flow from her image.[43] An example is a mid-to-late-twelfth-century marble relief found in the collection of the Museo-Regionale in Messina, Italy. [See Figure 3.]

> The large marble plaque shows the Virgin standing on a footstool. Represented in low relief, she is veiled and haloed and wears a *maphorion* that falls gracefully from her arms, which are raised in a gesture of prayer. The

[43] *Icon with the Virgin Orans*, now housed at Museo Regionale, Messina, Italy, Cat. No. 291, published in *The Glory of Byzantium, Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843-1261*, ed. Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., NY, 1997), 451.

palms of the Virgin's hands are pierced, as are those on several other surviving plaques of the Virgin similar in size and iconography. An almost identical plaque was found in the excavations of Saint George of Mangana in Constantinople and is now in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul. It was thought that the Virgin had once appeared in such a pose at the *hagiasma*, or holy water spring, in the Blachernai Church in Constantinople, which adjoined the main imperial residence. Apparently, after the icon was placed in the church, water began to flow from the Virgin's hands. The popularity of this venerated image helps to explain its proliferation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[44]

At *Pigi*, Virgin Mary was viewed as the fountain of the Fountain, source of the Source, a young woman called in her virginity to be the vessel of God's life-giving. In the Theotokos of Protection from Blachernae, we see Mary the Virgin appearing in a flash of light, representing her virginal holiness in an eschatological way, also appearing from the altar representing her union with the Holy of Holies, the Trinity. All of these ontological elements of the Virgin are symbolically represented on her clothing and especially related to her virginity of holiness in the three stars on the *maphorion*.

Often, in Byzantine church architecture the Virgin *Platytera* (a standing Theotokos with arms wide in the *orans* position, so-called because her womb is "wider than the heavens"), derived from or at least related to the Theotokos of Protection, appears in the apse behind or above the altar. In this icon, she often has stars on her *maphorion* but also holes on the hem, cuffs, and the belt of her robe.

In a discussion of miracle-working icons, Alexei Lidov discusses the organization of a shrine housing such an icon, such as the grouping of sanctuaries of the Virgin at Blachernae—the basilica, the *Hagia Soros* (a chapel dedicated to housing the garments of the Virgin), and the *Hagiasma* (a structure housing a well or spring where faithful might drink the "water of life"); the Hodegon monastery, and the church of Zoodochos Pege (*Pigi*) in Constantinople. In these shrines, for instance, a miracle-working icon was placed next to the miracle-working

[44] Ibid.

spring.[45] This gives further testimony to the possibility that "crosses," "holes" and "stars" were understood to be the portals of life-giving from Mary's son, meaning that she was and is the bearer of Christ. In addition, her holiness, which is her "virginity," is deep-rooted in the Trinity.

Overall, these symbols on Mary's veil—with the use of the cross or stars—implies that she gave birth to and protects her Son's faithful, that she was and is always embraced by the Trinity in her motherhood and care for the faithful. As *aieparthenos*, ever-virgin, she is a woman who is holy, who gives birth to Christ who is Life, and continues as mother of the living. Her "virginity" is holiness, a totality of embracing Christ, a union with the Holy Trinity, and a totality of mothering Christ into the world.

B. Patristic References to Mary's Virginity

It can be seen that the patristic writers link Mary's virginity with holiness and her motherhood in birthing Christ. Her holiness resides in a deep and abiding mystery of faith seen in her pregnancy while physically remaining "a virgin." Her virginity, and her ever-virginity, in the deepest mystical sense, always refers to the mother of Christ in light of her motherhood. This is the reason why the Eastern tradition developed the title *Panaghia* for the Virgin Mary, for she who is "all holy." Her own filling with the holiness of God in her body and in her motherhood perpetuates in giving birth to her Son throughout time. In the method of true *ekphrasis,* seeing if the interpretation of a symbol is corroborated in patristic writing and early liturgical texts, the following few examples of patristic references demonstrate this perspective on Mary's "virginity."

1. St. Ignatius (ca. 37-107)

St Ignatius of Antioch, at the beginning of the second century, described the virginity of Mary in life-giving terms. "Mary's

[45] Alexei Lidov, "Miracle-Working Icons of the Mother of God," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art,* ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milan, Italy: Skira Editore and Benaki Museum, Athens, 2000), 54.

virginity and giving birth, and even the Lord's death escaped the notice of the prince of this world: these three mysteries worthy of proclamation were accomplished in God's silence." God performs the miracle of life in mystery, in the silence of God's creative hand, a union of mankind and God in the Virgin's womb. In this same passage, Ignatius provided a symbol of this mystery of Christ's presence in the world: "A star shone forth in heaven above all the stars, the light of which was inexpressible, while its novelty struck men with astonishment."[46] Ignatius, speaking at one and the same time about the star over Bethlehem and the mystery within the womb of Mary, states: "God himself manifested in human form for the renewal of eternal life . . . because He mediated the abolition of death." The key idea concerning renewal of human life is directly correlated to a life forever abiding with God. We must keep this mystical idea in mind. Mary is the mother of Jesus who comes "for the renewal of eternal life." His presence with and within her is for renewal of life. Previously, in this letter Ignatius had established: "There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first passible and then impassible; even Jesus Christ our Lord."[47] This establishes the link between God's life-giving presence in and within Mary as the very nature of her holiness, her virginity.

2. St. Irenaeus (b. ca. 115/125)

In the early Christian writing of St. Irenaeus, we find yet another aspect of "purity" as it relates to "virginity." Through Mary, humankind is to be united with Christ—to incorruptibility and immortality. "But how could we be joined to incorruptibility

[46] "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1., ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0104.htm, § 19.

[47] "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0104.htm, § 7.

and immortality, unless first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible could be swallowed up by incorruptibility and mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption of sons?"[48] This "incorruptibility" and "immortality" that Irenaeus describes is ponderous, depicting not only the promise of resurrection and transfiguration for the faithful in end times, but an experience of profound and abiding holiness, living in the presence of God. This is the patristic sense of "purity."

3. St. Athanasius (293 to 373)

Fourth-century St. Athanasius writing on the Incarnation acknowledges that the child of Mary is "Himself the Life." Among innumerable phrases on Christ's life-giving, Athanasius wrote: "Can anyone, in face of this, still doubt that He has risen and lives, or rather that He is Himself the Life?"[49] C. S. Lewis, in reflecting on Athanasius' treatise on the Incarnation, sums up the writing by saying that in essence it is a "picture of the Tree of Life."[50] Athanasius describes Christ as the "Source of life," because "existing in a human body, to which He Himself gives life, He is still Source of life to all the universe, present in every part of it, yet outside the whole; and He is revealed both through the works of His body and through His activity in the world."[51] The Source of Life, existing in a human body, is the Source for all humanity and dwelt within his mother's womb and continues to live in her motherhood.

4. Gregory of Nyssa (330 to 394)

Christ, in Mary's virginity, prepared a way of newness for all humanity. Faithful humanity is in a movement of ascent to becoming a new creation. Gregory of Nyssa, describes the

[48] *Christian Classics Ethereal Library,* St. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," http://www.ccel.org/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.xx.html, Book III, chapter XIX, § 1.

[49] Athanasius, *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei,* trans. and ed. a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1993), §§ 30 and 61.

[50] Athanasius, *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation*, § 9.

[51] Athanasius, *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation*, § 17.

ascent and transcendence to full life with God as entering a great darkness. The newness of the mystery of God is a complete "surpassing of self."[52] Certainly, we see this in the Virgin Mary's "surpassing of self." Gregory describes God as "Life." The One who comes to the world as Mary's Child is Life. "True being is true life . . . It is not in the nature of what is not life to be the cause of life. . . . This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see Him (*The Life of Moses*, 2:243-244)."[53] The virginity of Mary, then, as a "purity" of holiness is in its truest nature demonstrating that she is a human being who has ascended to God and is the source for humanity of a life with God.

C. Liturgical Sources

1. The "Akathistos" (Attributed Author: Romanos ca. 5th C.)

The stanzas of the ancient *Akathistos* hymn, traditionally sung today throughout Lent in Eastern Rite Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches is a service of salutations to the Theotokos. In it are a multitude of symbolic images surrounding the divine event of the Annunciation—of an angel approaching the young, betrothed but not married Mary:

> An angel, highest among the angels, was sent from heaven to cry to the virgin: Rejoice! Rejoice Mother of God!
> And, beholding you, O Lord, taking bodily form, he stood marveling and with his bodiless voice cried aloud to her saying:
> Rejoice, Mary, through whom joy shall shine forth; rejoice, Mary, through whom the curse shall be blotted out. . . .
> Rejoice, Star who caused the Sun to appear; rejoice, Rejoice, Womb of the Divine Incarnation.[54]

In these verses, Heaven recognized the joy of the Virgin in the Greek word *chaire* (Rejoice!), later translated in Latin as *Ave*

[52] Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, Vol. 2, *The World: Creation and Deification*, trans. and ed. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 195.

[53] Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, 2:195.

[54] *Akathistos*, First Stanza, adapted translation by the author.

(Hail). The angel marvels at the Virgin's holiness and the joy that is resplendent in her holiness. And, the angel recognizes that it will be Mary who will be the vessel of salvation. When the Virgin agrees, she will become the throne of Christ, a mother bearing the One who gives life to all. Lastly, here, we find references to the star, the light of mystery who is Mary and is the reason the Sun (the Energy of the cosmos and all creation) appears.

The faithful respond to this opening scene in the *Akathistos*, as to all meditations throughout this long hymn, with a reply that wraps around God's mystery in the Incarnation which can only be expressed in paradox: "Rejoice, O Bride unwedded!" What else can be said? She is the virgin to whom God enters and remains.

Again in the third stanza, the priest sings:

> Creation became new when the Creator was shown to us His creatures,
> when He appeared born from the womb of a Virgin.
> Guarded as she was in perfect purity,
> when we see this marvel we praise her and sing to her:
> Rejoice, Flower of Incorruption; rejoice Crown of Chastity.
> Rejoice . . . O Bride Unwedded.[55]

We see here the patristic idea that Virgin Mary's purity is a mystery embracing her incorruption and chastity alongside motherhood, a bridal relationship in her pledge to God.

2. Small Compline

The *Small Compline* is a prayer service from the Daily Hours and is contained in the Eastern Orthodox liturgical service book, the *Horologion*. *Small Compline* is sung and prayed on most nights of the year. The service is composed of three Psalms (50, 69, 142); a Small Doxology; the Nicene Creed; the Canon followed by a hymn to the Virgin—*It is Truly Meet*; the *Trisagion*—an ancient prayer praising and calling upon

[55] *Akathistos*, Third Stanza, adapted translation by the author.

God ("Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us"); a *Troparia* (short hymn) for the day; *Lord, have mercy* (40 times); the Prayer of the Daily Hours; a special prayer of supplication; an ending prayer to Jesus Christ before mutual forgiveness; and a final blessing given by the priest. After this, there is a Litany and veneration of icons and relics. Usually, the *Small Compline* accompanies the *Akathistos*.

In the Doxology of the *Small Compline*, also sung just prior to the Divine Liturgy in Eastern Orthodox churches, the hymnology describes God as the "Fountain of Life." Besides the image of life-giving water, the hymnology also portrays Christ as light: "In Your Light we shall see light."[56] In the ancient tradition, God's fountain of life is Christ, symbolized as water that flows through his mother. We find this in the third ode of the *Compline*: "Rejoice, Lady, perennial Fountain of living water."[57] In the introductory hymn of the third ode, we find an interesting connection to the symbol of the star Spica in the Virgo constellation: "As a clear and untilled space you made the divine Ear of Corn [sometimes translated "wheat"] to burst forth."[58] Some scholars have tried to argue that these allusions to the pagan concept of fertility indicate that Christianity was attempting to raise the Theotokos to the realm of a goddess. Instead, it is clear that Christians understood these images only as symbols appropriated from pagan thought and recreated with Christian meaning, just as Christ was pictured as Apollo on the catacomb wall. It becomes a mystical symbol of the Virgin's bearing of life. Overall, the liturgical texts corroborate the mystery that seems to stand behind the stars on the *maphorion*.

The language of Eastern liturgical prayer lifts praise and prayers to the Virgin with a multitude of images. Yet, the Virgin's virginity is praised always alongside recognition that she is the holy mother who gave birth to New Life and is the mother who embraces the faithful until the end of time, giving life in and

[56] Greek Orthodox Clergy Syndesmos, *The Akathist Hymn and Little Compline*, 6th ed. (Pittsburgh, PA: "St. John of Chrysostom," Diocese of Pittsburgh, 1991), 7.

[57] Greek Orthodox Clergy Syndesmos, *The Akathist Hymn and Little Compline*, 11.

[58] Greek Orthodox Clergy Syndesmos, *The Akathist Hymn and Little Compline*, 11.

through her virginity. The image of "fountain of the Fountain," and "light" like the star Spica is the one who is the conduit for God's gifts of life.

3. The "Megalynarion": Liturgy of St. John Chyrsostom

An ancient hymn, the *Megalynarion,* sung in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom immediately following the consecration of the Eucharistic gifts, highly praises Mary's purity: "Theotokos, ever blessed, most pure, and mother of our God."[59] Here, in the context of praising Mary, the one who bore the Incarnate into this world, the hymn speaks of her "purity" as it relates directly to her motherhood. Her "purity" is mystically, at one and the same time, speaking of her "incorruptibility" and her "immortality" in a holiness of union with Christ the Physician, a union with the gift of eternal life, a union with the Trinity, a union with the Life-giver.

D. Jewish Mysticism of the First Centuries

Recent scholarship has found numerous connections between mystical texts found in the Dead Sea scrolls—relating to a mystical, eschatological trend among first-century Jewish sect writings—and mystical Christian tradition. In Rachel Elior's study of Jewish mysticism, originally written in Hebrew, she explains that this area of the study of mysticism must proceed carefully because it is intricately woven together with cultural issues.

> When dealing with complex cultural issues, however, it is prudent to refrain from hasty judgments and avoid presenting the rich diversity of the past in the light of the disputes of the present. The corpus of mystical writings in the traditional Jewish world developed over the course of thousands of years. With all its cultural and historical manifestations, mysticism embraces a rich world of thought, creativity, imagination, and inspiration, transcending existential experience.[60]

[59] *The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom,* A New Translation by Members of the Faculty of Hellenic College/Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, with prologue by Archbishop Iakovos (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1985), 23.

[60] Rachel Elior, *Jewish Mysticism: The Infinite Expression of Freedom* (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 1.

Culturally, Mary was a Jewish, Mediterranean young woman living within a community which no doubt focused on eschatological hopes. This informs our embrace of mystery contained in the virginity of Mary as it was expressed and symbolized mystically from the very beginning of Christian centuries.

> Timeless memory stored in language describes heavenly visions of a concrete reality that no longer exists or of a divine being who explains it. Language, then, is the bridge between the lost reality and heavenly eternity. In mystical language, Temple, chariot, altar, priesthood, the people of Israel (*keneset yisra'el*), and the Shekhinah are restored.[61]

Elior describes three conditions in the early Jewish mystical tradition that determine the ideological foundation of such experience. One of these would be:

> Activity within a cultural reality that acknowledges the existence of cosmological and linguistic conception bridging the revealed and concealed worlds and serving as a point of departure for a conscious internalization of opposites: "His glorious chariots . . . holy cherubim, luminous *ofanim* [wheels from Ezekiel's vision of God] in the *devir* [innermost part of the Temple] and the splendor of the luminous firmaments do they sing beneath His glorious seat."[62]

In this mystical sense, there could be Jewish mystical roots in the use of stars representing Mary the mother of Christ as one who has experienced the intimacy of the Holy One as her body encompassed the Son of God who is God. The term "'virginity" speaks of "moral purity." The *Manual of Discipline* in the Dead Sea manuscripts, in describing the relationship between ritual and moral purity, warns that "one cannot be had without the other. He who does not abandon sin but walks in the hardness of his heart will not be cleansed through atonement or be made pure through water."[63] This is not to say that

[61] Elior, *Jewish Mysticism*, 17.

[62] Elior, *Jewish Mysticism*, 20-21.

[63] Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran: Theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, trans. Emilie T. Sander and ed. James H. Charlesworth, with a new introduction (New York: Crossroad Publ. Co., Christian Origins Library, 1995), xxi.

the origin of the symbol of stars is directly found in the Dead Sea scrolls, but that these scrolls are now understood to relate to a broader eschatological Jewish mysticism that was present within many parallel sects in the first century. Noticeably, there are unusual discrepancies in the messianic, prophetic ideas in the Dead Sea manuscripts; however, this is characteristic of the varied early Jewish sects and mystical tradition. "In summary: When God one day renews the covenant with his people, two anointed ones shall arise, one high priest and one king; and of these the high priest has the higher rank."[64] This characteristic messianic concept of the Dead Sea corpus is also found in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* [apocryphal literature]. "In the Testament of Judah 24 the teaching concerning the two messiahs is introduced by an interpretation of Numbers 24:17, the oracle of Balaam concerning a star which shall come forth out of Jacob and the scepter which shall rise out of Israel."[65] This oracle also plays a role in the Damascus Document. "In the Testament of Levi 18:3 the messianic high priest is also represented as 'the star.'"[66] Ringgren explains that in other Dead Sea manuscripts there is an allusion to the high priest of the last days referring to the Branch of David, interpreting "the Star in Numbers 24:17 as a 'searcher of the Law.'"[67] If there are mystical connections between the early Jewish mysticism of the first century and our traditions concerning Mary the Mother of Christ, then there may be reason to believe that the star has multi-layered connotations (not uncommon in the ancient world), indicating that Mary is the mother of the messiah, of the Branch of David, and abides sinless in the inner sanctum of God.

E. Biblical Symbolic Sense of "Stars"

If, indeed, this search into early Jewish mysticism seems too remote, we can also look to the biblical symbolism found in "stars," and perhaps find comfort that early Christianity was

[64] Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran*, 171.
[65] Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran*, 171.
[66] Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran*, 172.
[67] Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran*, 176.

clearly founded in biblical tradition. In total, there are about seventy references to stars in the Scripture.[68] Stars as associated with creation "signal transcendence . . . [and] can also be images of glory, as in Paul's assertion that there is a specific 'glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory' (1 Cor. 15:41 NRSV)."[69] In addition, stars stand as symbols for holy people as in the apocalyptic vision of Daniel, the righteous "shall shine . . . like the stars forever and ever (Dan. 12:13 NRSV; cf. Phil. 2:15)."[70] And, obviously, the star over Bethlehem drew the magi to the birth of Christ (Mt. 2:2, 7, 9-10). According to the editors of the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, the star motifs seem to all converge in Revelation:

> Christ holds mysterious stars (angels of the churches, we learn later) in his hand (Rev. 1;16; 2:1). Christ is himself "the bright morning star" (Rev. 22:16 NRSV). To the believer who overcomes, Christ promises to give 'the morning star' (Rev. 2:28 NRSV), apparently symbolic of eternal life in heaven, and perhaps of Christ himself. . . . and, Israel, portrayed as a woman, wears "a crown of twelve stars" (Rev. 12:1 NRSV).
>
> In sum, stars in the Bible are images of mystery. At a literal level they demonstrate God's awe-inspiring creativity and providence. In symbolic uses they appear in apocalyptic visions of impending cosmic events that we can barely imagine, and they represent such transcendent beings as saints in eternal glory and the resplendent ascended Christ.[71]

Based on biblical symbolism alone, it is not hard to see how stars may symbolize Mary who bears God into the world, the "bright morning star," thus being given the "morning star," and the woman who has "overcome" sin and abides eternally in heaven.

[68] "Stars," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 813.

[69] "Stars," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 813.

[70] "Stars," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 813.

[71] "Stars," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 813-814.

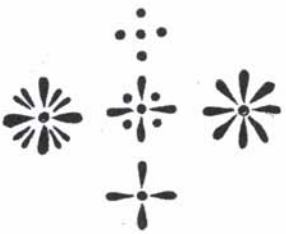
F. Conclusion

Having considered all the reasons for why the three crosses or three stars appear on the virgin's veil in the ancient iconographic tradition and why they represent her virginity before, during and after the birth of Christ, we have discovered layers of meaning and various possible sources for the symbolic meaning. Along with a sampling of patristic commentary on Mary's "virginity," it appears there is a fuller meaning of "virginity" that recalls the glory of holiness in the Theotokos, her connection to the One of the Inner Temple, purity in her distance from sin, and motherhood of the messiah who is the star in Balaam's oracle. One mystical meaning is layered on another. In the ancient mind, the language of mystery is expressed in cultural images without definitive and singular, albeit limited, meaning. The star, originally a cross for the witness of Christ, which became three stars representing the presence of the Trinity, is an image that still conjures up awe and reverence, even in the modern mind of an astronomer; but, to the believer, the three stars on the *maphorion* of the Theotokos should stir deep wonder and faith in the ever-virginity of Mary, the mother of Christ.

Figure 1
Theotokos, Ever Virgin
Directress

Theotokos Hodegetria, The Directress, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, http://www.goarch.org/

Figure 2



George Galavaris, "The Stars of the Virgin, an *ekphrasis* of an *ikon* of the Mother of God," *Eastern Churches Review* 1 (1967-68): 364.

Figure 3
Virgin Orans

Icon with the Virgin Orans, now housed at Museo Regionale, Messina, Italy, Cat. No. 291, published in *The Glory of Byzantium, Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843-1261*, edited by Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., NY, 1997), 451.